



END OF THE EARTH

EXPLORING THE FALKLANDS AND REMOTE SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND WITH POSEIDON EXPEDITIONS IS THE ULTIMATE BUCKET LIST ADVENTURE

BY MARY AND CHARLES LOVE

Glittering white, shining blue, raven black, in the light of the sun the land looks like a fairy tale. ... —Roald Amundsen, Norwegian explorer

For a long time, we’d dreamed of traveling to the Falkland Islands and the remote Antarctic island of South Georgia, located some 1,400 miles east

of the tip of South America. Why?

South Georgia, one of the jewels in the Southern Ocean, offers an unsurpassed window on pristine landscapes and wild-life—spectacles of nature in the raw that take your breath away. A friend who’d recently been there told us, “Stepping onto the island is like walking into a

natural history movie.”

The island’s epic landscapes—glistening blue bays, glacial deltas and snowy peaks draped with clouds—provide backdrops for some of the planet’s greatest concentrations of animals: over 30 million breeding birds (including the largest colony of king penguins on the planet) and four species of seals in large

numbers. It’s also possible to see humpback and southern right whales.

South Georgia (a British overseas territory) is steeped in history. Once a center for the sealing and whaling industries, it played a role in one of the most heroic survival stories in maritime history. Stranded on tiny Elephant Island in 1916 after



his ship *Endurance* became trapped by ice in the Weddell Sea, Sir Ernest Shackleton sailed with five crewmembers in the *James Caird*, a 23-foot

open boat, across 800 miles of turbulent ocean to South Georgia to seek help. He succeeded and eventually rescued his entire crew.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Poseidon Expeditions

United States & Canada: **347-801-2610**

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The sparsely populated Falkland Islands, located about 400 miles east of the South American mainland, are a birder’s paradise. A compact group of some 750 islands—hilly, treeless and with rugged coastlines—the Falklands are typically a stop en route to and from South Georgia. Home to over 200 bird species, including six species of penguins, the islands have the world’s largest populations of light-mantled sooty albatrosses, striated caracaras and slender-billed prions.

- 1. King penguins, South Georgia.
- 2. Black-browed albatross, Falkland Islands.
- 3. Deluxe cabin, the *Sea Spirit*.
- 4. The *Sea Spirit*, South Georgia.

This company’s unusual 19-day itinerary at the beginning of the Antarctic spring (late October/early November) includes the Falklands and an incredible six days on South Georgia. Since very few companies offer so many days on South Georgia, we signed on without hesitation.

Our ship, the 114-passenger *Sea Spirit*, was the perfect maritime “home away from home.” Because our first two days were at sea, we had plenty of time

Poseidon Expeditions’ *Sea Spirit*

We traveled with Poseidon Expeditions, a highly regarded leader of expeditions to the Antarctic and Arctic regions.





© Jeremy Richards

to familiarize ourselves with the vessel and our fellow guests, who were well traveled and from 15 different countries.

The benefits of being on a relatively small ship quickly became clear. A ship with fewer passengers can offer more and longer landings ashore. Also, expedition team members and lecturers can spend more time socializing with guests and answering questions in their areas of expertise. This is in addition to formal lectures and workshops on a variety of topics: polar history and explorers, marine biology, geology, birds, mammals, wildlife photography

and more.

Although our trip was billed as an "expedition," we didn't lack creature comforts. Our luxurious cabin was spacious, with plenty of drawers, cubby holes and a walk-in closet to stow clothing and gear.

The cuisine, too, was first-rate. Dinner, prepared by a French chef, was served sit-down style with a choice among four entrées. Lunch and breakfast buffets offered plenty of selections. And the chef was happy to prepare special meals for those with dietary restrictions. Beverages included beers, premium wines (over

3,000 bottles were on board) and creative cocktails.

From dawn until late night, the Club Lounge was a popular place for socializing, afternoon tea and evening cocktails, accompanied by hors d'oeuvres and live piano music. An adjacent library had many fascinating books about polar destinations and explorers. Upstairs was a small gym and an outdoor Jacuzzi.

Shore Landings

On the way to and from South Georgia, the *Sea Spirit* made landings in the Falklands. In Stanley, the capital, we

5. Allardyce Mountains, South Georgia.

6. Elephant seal fight, South Georgia.

7. Kayakers on the *Sea Spirit*.

successfully shopped for sweaters and scarves made of the ultra-soft wool for which the Falklands are known.

On West Point Island, we trekked to a colony of black-browed albatrosses (approximately 2,500 breeding pairs) on a steep, tussock-covered hill overlooking the sea. Quietly winding our way around thick clumps of grass, we moved in close. How close? Close enough to feel and hear the swoosh of

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their powerful wings (they have a wing span around 8 feet) as they circled by and landed just a foot or two away. Some pairs nuzzled each other in elaborate courtship rituals; others settled on their nests. Photographing them became addictive.

Two days after leaving the Falklands, South Georgia came into view. Jagged, snow-covered mountains loomed above the ocean. Small bays along rugged, wave-swept shores dared us to come ashore.

Devoid of humans and partially shrouded in clouds, the mysterious landscapes reinforced a sense of solitude and remoteness from civilization. Our excitement ramped up as we anticipated our first shore landing.

The island (approximately 100 miles long and up to 24 miles wide) is uninhabited except for a handful of non-permanent residents working at two British research stations and at Grytviken—a former

whaling station, today the site of a small museum managed by the conservation-oriented South Georgia Heritage Trust.

Over the next six days—thanks to good weather (it never dropped below freezing), calm seas and the expert planning of our expedition leaders—we made more shore landings than any of us expected (11 over six days!). Time and space allow us to mention just a few.

Gold Harbour proved one of the island's most beautiful

8. Sunset, South Georgia.

9. Macaroni penguin, South Georgia.

10. Poseidon expeditioner, South Georgia.

sites. An amphitheater of sheer cliffs and hanging glaciers set the stage for an abundance of seabirds and seals. The king penguin colony along the beach and streams here numbered around 25,000 breeding pairs. Hundreds of gentoos and other



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penguin species nested in the surrounding tussock grass.

On the beach, bull elephant seals defended their female harems. These enormous, bel-
lowing creatures—males can be 20 feet long and weigh over 4 tons—are perhaps nature’s most wretched and ugliest creatures. We watched two bulls, called “beachmasters,” fight ferociously for dominance over a harem of some 50 females. A beach-master drives off other males until a stronger one comes along to “dethrone” him. Best not to get near these big guys!

Our visit to **Grytviken** oc-
cupied a full day. The remains of a whaling station on South Georgia, founded here in 1904, are testament to a once thriving enterprise. Today, this ghost town includes a church; a grave-
yard where Shackleton is buried; beached whaling ships; huge boilers for processing blubber; coils of rusty chain sturdy enough to move, well, a whale; and the former accommoda-
tions for several hundred, mostly Norwegian, whalers. They worked here until the demand for whale oil all but disappeared in the mid-20th century.

We also visited the small museum that showcases memorabilia and artifacts from whaling days. A replica of the *James Caird* astonished us with its fragility and small size. Afterward, we paid our respects at Shackleton’s grave. (He died of a heart attack here in 1922, when he was preparing for another expedition.)

St. Andrews Bay was one of South Georgia’s highlights. The king penguin rookery here num-
bers some 200,000 breeding pairs—one of the largest con-
centrations of wildlife anywhere on the planet. We watched penguins crowd together as far as we could see on a vast glacial delta bordered by snow-pow-
dered peaks. Enormous cigar-shaped elephant seals and bulky fur seals sprawled where-
ever they could find space. (We were advised to steer well clear of the fur seals since they can be aggressive.) It was *Animal Planet* on steroids. And we had several hours ashore to take in the spectacle.

Drygalski Fjord is a narrow, serene waterway hemmed in by 3,000-foot snow-covered peaks. An afternoon Zodiac excursion took us near the shore where fur seal pups were frolicking on rocks. In front of us, one panora-
ma after another of mountains, calm waters and overcast skies came into view. It was like walk-
ing through a gallery of Chinese ink-brush paintings.

Our landing sites were too numerous to describe here: Salisbury Plain, Fortuna Bay, Ocean Harbour, Prion Island and more. Suffice it to say that every landing offered unforgettable encounters with nature.

As we cruised towards Ushuaia, Argentina, on our last day at sea, the sunrise tinged elongated clouds red in the east as a full moon set in the west. A pair of wandering albatrosses glided just above the waves, then gracefully soared skyward.

Shackleton’s words came to mind: “The stark polar lands grip the hearts of men who have lived on them in a manner hard-
ly understood by people who’ve never got beyond the pale of civilization.”

Now, we could understand his fascination with the beau-
tiful, otherworldly regions few human eyes have looked upon—and are already anxious to return. ➤



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